

LOCKING DEVICE WITH CONVERTIBLE SHANK INCLUDING LOCKING METHOD THEREOF

RELATED APPLICATION

This application is a divisional application of co-pending U.S. Patent Application No. 09/556,637, filed April 24, 2000, now U.S. Patent No. 6,672,115 issued January 6, 2004, which was related to co-pending U.S. Patent Application No. 09/153,511, filed September 15, 1998, the contents of which are specifically incorporated herein and which was further related to U.S. Patent Application No. 09/153,511, filed September 15, 1998, now U.S. Patent No. 6,055,832 issued May 2, 2000, the contents of which are specifically incorporated herein.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention broadly relates to locking devices that are adapted to secure objects together. More particularly, the present invention concerns key operable locking devices. The present invention is directed to size adjustable locking shackles and shanks for such locking devices that, for example, may be used for towage applications, bicycles and the like. This invention specifically includes a method of providing size adjustment so that the locking device can work with differently sized apertures.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Over the years, there have been numerous variations of locking devices for a multitude of applications. Typically, a locking device is used to secure objects together, whether it be two independent items, a door for an enclosure, or the like. Moreover, a wide variety of locking mechanisms have been employed, including key actuated locks and combination locks, all of various constructions.

A widely used locking device is known as a padlock. The prior art padlock works adequately for a number of conventional applications wherein the span of

objects to be secured is relatively short or where the span can be fitted with a hasp. However, numerous shortcomings of padlocks become apparent when a padlock is sought to be used in applications wherein two objects of thick cross-sections are to be secured. Examples of such conventional applications include those where telescopically joined round or square tubing members need to be secured together. Another example is where perpendicular or axially cross-bolting of gates and doors require a substantially rod-like locking device.

As a result of the need for rod or elongated shackle locking devices, various devices have been developed to penetrate multiple surfaces having aligned through bores for the purpose of securing those objects together. Once such example is found in U.S. Patent No. 2,677,261 issued May 1954 to Jacobi. In the Jacobi patent, a complex locking device is taught in order to prevent actuation of a refrigerator door handle. Another example of a rod locking device is found in U.S. Patent No. 4,576,021 issued March 18, 1986 to Holden. Holden discloses a locking rod device having a rectangular locking head that is somewhat bulky and non-symmetrical. In the Holden locking device, a radially extendable locking pin engages a circumferential opening in the latch portion of the shackle in order to retain the shackle and locking head together. The bulky nature of this lock head design, however, makes it disadvantageous in use where only limited space is available.

Several additional types of straight shackle locks have been developed wherein the latched portion of the shackle is threadably received in a screw-type lock. Examples of these locks are described in U.S. Patent No. 4,619,122 issued October 28, 1986 to Simpson as well as in U.S. Patent No. 4,711,106 issued December 8, 1987 to Johnson. These types of locks, however, tend to be inconvenient and cumbersome to use due to the threaded nature of their locked

mechanisms. Specifically, the key actuatable locking head described in these two patents require a large number of key rotations in order to thread and fully secure the locking head portion onto the straight shackle. The inconvenience and difficulty of threaded lock systems is compounded when the lock is located in tight or difficult to access areas. Further, the threaded screw lock is especially prone to corrosion and seizure due to the small dimensioning of the threads.

Accordingly, there remains a need for improved locking structures of a rod or cable type nature that can effectively lock objects together. There is a need for such locking mechanisms to have suitable seals and protective structures to prevent ingress of unwanted substances, such as dirt and moisture, into the locking mechanism. There is a further need for locking structures that reduce the tendency for false locking conditions. These conditions are particularly true in the case of trailer hitch locks that utilize linear pins or shanks to connect a draw bar to the trailer hitch receiver inasmuch as these types of hitch locks are continuously exposed to dirt, soil, road grime and the like.

Consequently, my prior U.S. patent application referenced above is designed to meet the aforementioned situations and problems. However, as in the case of trailer hitch units and locks, there are a number of different size units available on the market depending on the size of the rig being towed. Moreover, there are numerous other lock applications which utilize linear pin and shank locks that incorporate shanks having different diameter sizes for different situations. As a result, a number of different locking devices having different sized shanks are needed to meet varied particular applications. This is cumbersome and expensive. Therefore, there is a need for a locking mechanism using a linear shank that is convertible for various applications. In this manner, a single locking unit may be used for a number of varied

size locking requirements, such as where the apertures in the units to be connected and locked are varied from application to application.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

It is an object of the present invention to provide a new and useful locking device and method that is simple in construction yet which provides a strong mechanical construction.

It is another object of the present invention to provide a locking structure and method which is convertible for use with different sized connecting openings.

It is yet another object of the present invention to provide a convertible locking structure and method which is adaptable in size for different connection openings.

Still another object of the invention is to provide variable mechanisms for maintaining the convertible state of the locking structure once it is selected.

A further object of the present invention is to provide a bolt-type locking structure having a pleasing, symmetrical appearance.

According to the present invention, then, a method is described for use with a locking device that has a locking head, a shackle member with a linear shank having first and second end portions and a thickness dimension, a latch portion disposed on the shank first end portion and a stop member disposed on the shank second end portion. The locking head releasably locks onto the latch portion of the shank. The method involves varying the diameter of the linear shank to adapt the locking device to variably sized apertures in components to be locked.

Broadly, the method includes the first step of providing a sleeve with an inner diameter sized to closely fit over said shank. This sleeve is telescopingly engaged onto the shank and retained in position on the shank. Next, the method positions the shank and sleeve within apertures of the components to be locked. Finally, the

locking head is engaged with the latch portion. In the disclosed embodiment the sleeve has an inner diameter sized to closely fit over the shank and a sleeve length sufficient to extend over a majority of the length of the shank.

The method can further comprise the steps of providing a plurality of sleeves each having a common inner diameter for telescopically engaging the shank and a different outer diameter, selecting a sleeve having an outer diameter corresponding to the size of the apertures in the components to be locked, and inserting the selected sleeve onto the shank to vary the diameter thereof according to the size of the apertures in the components to be locked.

In another form, the method can further comprise the steps of providing a plurality of sleeves having variable inner and outer diameters and configured to be selectively nested within each other, selecting one or more nested sleeves having a combined outer diameter corresponding to the size of the apertures in the components to be locked, and inserting the selected combination of sleeves onto the shank to vary the diameter thereof according to the size of the apertures in the components to be locked.

In either event, the sleeve, if desired, may be retained in position on the shank. This can be done by providing an annular groove in the shank proximate the latch portion thereof, and then positioning a retaining member in said groove about the shank after the sleeve has been telescopically positioned onto the shank. Alternatively, this can be done by providing a first set of threads on one end portion of the sleeve and a second set of threads on the stop portion, and then threadably engaging the sleeve with the stop portion after the sleeve has been telescopically positioned onto the shank.

In another form of the invention, the method includes the first step of providing a sleeve with an inner diameter sized to closely fit over said shank in an engaged position with said sleeve having a sleeve length sufficient to extend over a majority of the length of said shank when in the engaged position. This method the employs the alternative steps of either telescopingly engaging the sleeve onto said shank and thereafter positioning the shank and sleeve together within one sized aperture or positioning the shank without the sleeve being engaged thereon within another sized aperture. Thereafter, the method includes the step of engaging the locking head with the latch portion. This method, if desired, may include the further step of resisting removal of the sleeve from said shank by providing a compressible resilient element operative to engage the sleeve and said shank when the sleeve is in the engaged position.

The disclosed invention describes a locking structure that may be employed in these methods to secure objects together. In its broad form, this locking device includes a shackle member having a shank terminating in first and second end portions. The shank is preferably linear. A latch portion is disposed at the shank first end portion and is configured to selectively engage a locking member. A stop portion is disposed at the shank second end portion. A sleeve is configured for selective engagement on the linear shank to vary the thickness dimension thereof. A retaining member is included for releasably securing the sleeve on the shank. If desired, the sleeve and the shank may have a common linear length between the stop portion and the latch portion.

In one form, the shank first end portion includes an annular groove therein proximate to the latch portion. The retaining member is in the form of a retention element configured for selective positioning within this annular groove to maintain

the sleeve in position on the shank. For example, the retention element can be a C-shaped washer that has facing arm ends that define a gap therebetween for selective positioning in the annular groove. In another form, the retaining member is in the form of a first set of threaded elements disposed on one end of the sleeve which are configured for threaded engagement with the stop portion. To accommodate this, it is preferred that the stop portion include an end portion which has a second set of threaded elements disposed therein and which are configured to receive and engage the first set of threaded elements disposed on the sleeve.

In one embodiment, a plurality sleeve elements each having a common inner diameter sized for mounting on the shank and each with a different outer diameter. Preferably, the sleeve includes three of such sleeve elements with each having a different outer diameter varying between 3/8 inch to 1/2 inch. In another embodiment, a plurality of sleeve elements having variable outer diameters and configured to be selectively nested within each other. The innermost sleeve element of the nested sleeve elements is sized for mounting on the shank. In a preferred structure, the plurality of sleeve elements is in the form of three of such nested sleeve elements wherein a first sleeve element is sized for fitting onto the shank, the second sleeve element is sized for fitting onto the first sleeve element, and the third sleeve element is sized for fitting onto the second sleeve element.

The locking device of this invention may be a locking hitch pin device for interconnecting a hitch bar with a hitch receiver. Here, the bar and receiver each include apertures disposed therein for receiving the hitch pin device. The locking device thus includes a hitch pin shank having first and second end portions and a thickness dimension. A portion disposed at the shank first end portion, and a locking head member is movable between locked and unlocked states and

configured for selective engagement with the latch portion. A stop member disposed at the shank second end portion. A sleeve is then provided for selective engagement with the hitch pin shank to selectively vary the thickness dimension thereof to match the size diameter of the casing and receiver apertures to permit snug engagement therewith. A retaining apparatus is provided for selectively securing the sleeve in position on the hitch pin shank.

Here, also if desired, the locking device includes a set of at least two sleeve elements each having an inner diameter sized for mounting on the pin element, each with a different outer diameter to match varying sized bar and receiver apertures. The retaining apparatus can have a first set of threads disposed on one end of each sleeve element configured for threaded engagement with the stop member. The member can include an end portion having a second set of threads disposed therein configured to receive and engage the first set of thread elements disposed on the sleeve element.

These and other objects of the present invention will become more readily appreciated and understood from a consideration of the following detailed description of the exemplary embodiments when taken together with the accompanying drawings, in which:

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Figure 1 is an exploded perspective view of a locking device according to a first exemplary embodiment of the invention to be used to lockably interconnect a draw bar to a trailer hitch receiver;

Figure 2 is a perspective view of the locking device shown in Figure 1 but in a secured state interconnecting the tow bar and trailer hitch receiver.

Figure 3 is an exploded perspective view of the shackle member of the locking device shown in Figure 1 with one embodiment of the size conversion device of the invention;

Figure 4 is a perspective view of the shackle member shown in Figure 3;

Figure 5 is an exploded perspective view of the shackle member of the locking device shown in Figure 1 illustrating one preferred embodiment of the size conversion device of the present invention;

Figure 6 is an exploded perspective view, with parts in shadow, of the shackle member of the locking device shown in Figure 1 illustrating a second embodiment of the size conversion device of the present invention;

Figure 7 is an enlarged cross-sectional view taken substantially about lines 7-7 of Figure 4 and particularly illustrating one retaining embodiment of the invention;

Figure 8 is an enlarged, exploded perspective view of one end portion of the shackle member of the locking device shown in Figure 1 illustrating a second retaining embodiment of the invention;

Figure 9 is an enlarged perspective view of a C-clip construction which may be used as a retaining member in the embodiment illustrated in Figure 8;

Figure 10 is an enlarged cross-sectional view similar to Figure 7 but illustrating the second retaining embodiment of Figures 8-9;

Figure 11 is a side view in elevation of the locking device shown in Figure 1, in a secured state, with the tow bar and trailer hitch receiver shown in cross-section;

Figure 12 is a side view in elevation substantially similar to that of Figure 11 but illustrating the placement and use of the size conversion device of Figure 3;

Figure 13 is an enlarged cross-sectional view of the locking device of the present invention but illustrating another sleeve retaining embodiment for the size conversion device of the present invention; and

Figure 14 is an enlarged cross-sectional view substantially similar to that of Figure 13 but illustrating yet another embodiment of the sleeve retaining embodiment of the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE EXEMPLARY EMBODIMENTS

The present invention is directed to a locking device that is adapted to secure objects together. The locking device is broadly that of my related U.S. Patent Applications referenced above and preferably includes a key operable locking head that axially mates, through an axial opening thereof, with a shackle member. An axially insertable key rotates a locking core in the locking head in order to rotate a retainer that engages and releases a locking head on a latch portion of the shackle member. While the shackle member may take a variety of configurations, the present invention is particularly useful as a receiver lock that may be employed to secure a draw bar, sometimes also referred to as a hitch bar or a tow bar, to a trailer hitch receiver. However, the present invention may also be used as a coupler lock, as a watercraft lock, cross bolt gate lock, spare tire lock, bike carrier lock, a cable lock and any other similar locking structure. It should be understood that any number of different kinds of lock configurations and types may be used with the present invention. Some specific examples of these are illustrated in the above referenced patents. Accordingly, the present invention is not to be limited to any particular kind of locking head design or operation.

The exemplary embodiments of the present invention are shown in Figures 1-14, where like reference numbers refer to like parts. With reference first to Figure 1, it may be seen that a locking device 10 includes a shackle member 12 and a key operable locking head 14 which may receive a latch portion 16 of the shackle member 12 to define a fastened state, as is shown in Figure 2. In Figures 1 and 2, the locking device 10 is shown to be constructed as a receiver lock which may extend through the aligned bores 18 and 20 of a receiver 22 and a hitch or tow bar 24, respectively. The receiver 22, of course, is secured to a frame 26, for example, in the underside of a vehicle 28. It should be understood, however, that the description of the present locking device 10 is not intended to be limited to a receiver lock, with such construction being provided for illustration purposes only.

With reference now to Figures 3-6, 11 and 12, it may be seen that shackle member 12 preferably includes an elongated linear portion that is in the form of an elongated shank 30 that has a central axis "X". The latch portion 16 is disposed at a first end of shank 30 with a stop portion 32 being disposed at a second end of shank 30 opposite the latch portion 16. The stop portion 32 may be of any desired or known shape or configuration including a knob, a bent rod, an angular extension of the shank 30, a dumbbell, and the like. Preferably, the stop portion or member 32 is preferably formed as an enlarged knob that is generally frustoconical in shape so that it is symmetrical with locking head 14, as is clearly shown in the various Figures.

The stop portion 32 preferably includes an outer surface 34 and an annular circumferential end surface 36. The stop portion 32 has a diameter dimension that is larger than the outer diameter dimension of the cylindrical shank 30. An annular shoulder 38 at the end surface 36 forms an inner rim for the stop portion 32. Suitable knurling, if desired, may be formed on the side wall surface 36 proximate to the

shoulder 38 for enhancing finger grip capability. Preferably, the latch portion 16, the shank 30 and the stop portion 32 are formed as an integral one-piece construction, for example, of a suitable forged steel. Alternatively, the stop portion 32 may be suitably affixed to the shank 30 in any convenient manner that is not readily removable should the integrity of locking device 10 be attacked.

The locking head 14 is best shown in Figures 1, 2, 11 and 12. Here, it may be seen that the locking head 14 includes a housing 40 that is preferably formed to have a similar shape as the stop portion 32 so that the shackle member 30 and the locking head 14 present a substantially symmetrical appearance when in the fastened state as shown in Figures 2, 11 and 12. Accordingly, the housing 40 is generally frustoconical in shape having an outer sidewall surface 42 and an annular circumferential end surface 44. An annular shoulder 46 at the end 44 forms an inner rim, and knurling, if desired, may be formed on the outer surface 44 proximately to shoulder 46. A plastic cap element 50 is provided that clips over the key end of the locking head 14 in order to provide protection against environmental elements, as described in my previously referenced prior patent application. It should be noted, however, that any type of appropriate locking mechanism may be used with the present invention as the locking head 14 so long as it is adapted to engage with the latch portion 16 of the shank 30. Accordingly, further details thereof will not be discussed herein.

Referring now with particularity to Figures 1, 2, 11 and 12, it can be appreciated that the diameter dimension of the shank 30 is sized to fit within the apertures 18, 20 of the two units 22, 24 to be interconnected. Unfortunately, there is little uniformity in aperture size dimensions for trailer hitch arrangements let alone other types of locking devices as discussed above. Therefore, prior to the present

invention, a number of different sized shackle members 12 along with their accompanying locks and other components have been required to meet the varying size dimension demands of the consumer market. The present invention obviates these requirements.

Referring now particularly to Figures 3, 4, 11 and 12, the shank 30 has a set diameter dimension "A". In the prior art, these typically have ranged from 3/8"-5/8", with the 5/8" and 1/2" sizes being the most popular. Shanks having a 7/16" diameter are also used, but less frequently. In accordance with the preferred embodiment of the present invention, the diameter "A" of the shank 30 is preferably the smallest commonly used size, or 3/8". When the apertures 18, 20 of the units 22, 24 are this size, then the shackle 12 as illustrated in Figure 3 is used by itself and results in the locked connection illustrated in Figure 11. However, if the apertures 18, 20 are larger than this dimension, then the sleeve 52 of the present invention is utilized to accommodate for the larger openings or apertures.

In a preferred embodiment, the sleeve 52 may be in the form of a metal tube sized and shaped to slidingly fit over the shank 30. Alternatively, the sleeve 52 may be made from a hard plastic material such as polyurethane or polyethylene. While a metal sleeve 52 provides greater strength and durability, a plastic sleeve 52 cushions the device 10, reduces rattle noise and eliminates surface scratching.

Preferably, the inner diameter dimension "B" of the sleeve 52 is just slightly larger than the outer dimension "A" of the shank 30 so that the sleeve 52 will snugly slide or telescope over the shank 30 to provide a new, larger outer diameter as described below. In the preferred embodiment, the sleeve 52 has a linear length that is the same as the linear length of the shank 30 between the shoulder 38 and the latch portion 16. In this manner, the sleeve will snugly fit between the stop portion 32

and the locking head 14 once the sleeve 52 is mounted over the shank 30 and the unit inserted through the apertures 18, 20 as illustrated in Figure 12. In this manner, one sleeve member 52 will enable the locking device 10 of the invention to be used with the two most common sized trailer hitch arrangements.

Referring now to Figures 5 and 6, the sleeve 52 of the present invention may take the form of several embodiments. The sleeve 52 was described above as a single sleeve element. As noted previously, however, there are several predominant sized aperture combinations for shackle-type locks, and these are typically 3/8", 7/16", 1/2" and 5/8". Therefore, one preferred embodiment of the invention for the sleeve 52 includes a set of at least two and preferably three sleeve elements 54, 56 and 58 as illustrated in Figure 5. The three sleeve elements 54-58 all have a common inner diameter dimension "B" for snug fitting over the shank 30 which, as previously mentioned, is preferably about 3/8". However, each of the sleeve elements 54, 56 and 58 have a different outer diameter dimension "C", "D", and "E" corresponding, preferably, to 7/16", 1/2" and 5/8". It should be understood, however, that these specific dimensions are for illustrative purposes only and that the invention is not to be in any way limited to these dimensions or combinations thereof.

As a result of the above, a single locking device 10 having a single shackle 12 and lock head 14 can be used in any number of different situations where the apertures 18, 20 are of various different sizes. This is accomplished by simply determining which size sleeve element 52 is needed to fit the apertures 18, 20 and then slipping the appropriate sleeve 52 onto and over the shank 30.

In an alternative embodiment as illustrated in Figure 6, the sleeve 52 may be in the form of a set of at least two and preferably three stacked and nested sleeve elements 60, 62 and 64. In this instance, the inner diameter and outer diameter

dimensions of each of the sleeve elements 60-64 are different. The inner diameter of the first sleeve element 60 is "B" as initially shown in Figure 3 so that it may readily mount onto the shank 30. However, the outer diameter of the first sleeve 60 and the inner diameter of the second sleeve 62 are substantially the same, i.e. "C". There is a slight difference so that the second sleeve element 62 can be slidingly mounted over the first sleeve element 60. In this manner, the combination of the two sleeve elements 60, 62 can be mounted onto the shank 30 and adjust the diameter dimension of the shackle member 12 to another larger size for connecting through yet another sized set of apertures 18, 20. Finally, the inner diameter of the third sleeve element 64 is approximately the same as the outer diameter of the second sleeve element 62, that is "D", so that it may slidingly mount over the second sleeve element 62. In this manner, one may choose to use none, one, two or all three of the nested sleeve elements 60, 62 and 64 to adjust the diameter dimension of the shackle 12 for desired connections depending on the sizes of the apertures 18, 20.

Regardless of which sleeve 52 combination (Figures 5 and 6) one chooses to use, a retaining apparatus is utilized to assist in maintaining the sleeve 52 in position on the shank 30. Referring first to Figures 3 and 7-10, an annular groove 66 is disposed in the first end portion of the shank 30 proximate but inside the latch portion 16. In one form of the invention, an O-ring 68 may be placed in the groove 66 once the sleeve 52 is positioned over the shank 30. The O-ring is sized so that it acts as a stop member against the first end portion of the sleeve 52 to hold it in abutting position against the stop portion shoulder 38 as illustrated in Figure 7. Depending on the thickness of the sleeve 52 (reference Figures 5 and 6), the O-ring should be dimensioned accordingly. It should also be understood that the annular groove 66 may be formed to have a cross-section that is either U-shaped or square-shaped.

The square-shaped groove 66 tends to hold the O-ring 68 more firmly therein as compared to a U-shaped groove 66. However, the U-shaped groove 66 enables one to more easily move the O-ring into and out of the groove 66 to permit easier changing of the sleeve 52.

Alternatively, and as illustrated in Figures 8-10, a C-shaped washer 70 may be utilized in the groove 66. In preferred form, the washer 70 has a pair of facing arms 72 that have free ends which define a gap 74 therebetween. The gap 74 is sized to engage the groove 66. Accordingly, the C-shaped washer 70 seats in the groove 66 of shank 30 to define a stop for the sleeve 52 mounted on the shank 30 as described above for the O-ring 68.

In an alternate embodiment of the invention, the retaining apparatus may take another form other than that illustrated in Figures 7-10. Referring to Figures 13 and 14, the stop portion 32 may be modified to act as the retaining mechanism in conjunction with the sleeve 52. In one form illustrated in Figure 13, the end portion of the stop member 32 in the form of the second end of the shank 30 adjacent the shoulder 38 is modified to include a set of threads 80. Likewise, the inner surface 82 of the sleeve 52 includes a set of threads 84 proximate one end thereof. In this manner, when the sleeve 52 is slidingly mounted over the shank 30, the sleeve 52 is rotated to engage the first and second sets of threads 80, 84 to securely fasten the sleeve 52 onto the shank 30.

Referring to Figure 14, another modified version of the retaining apparatus is shown. In this embodiment, a set of threads 86 are disposed onto the outer end surface of the sleeve 52 rather than the inner surface as in the previous embodiment. In addition, the end portion of the stop member 32 is modified to include an annular channel 88 formed into the shoulder 38. A set of threads 90 are

disposed on the radially outer surface of the channel 88 and are adapted to engage the set of threads 86 when the sleeve 52 is mounted onto the shank 30. In this manner, the sleeve 52 is firmly maintained in position on the shank 30.

Of course, it should also be appreciated by the ordinarily skilled artisan that other mechanisms can be provided to accomplish the retention of the sleeve onto the shackle. For example, the present invention contemplates that the sleeve can be retained on the shackle member merely by means of a close friction fit engagement, since when the locking device is in the assembled state securing two components together, the sleeve is necessarily sandwiched between the locking head and the stop. Alternatively, spring ball assemblies could be provided to provide for appropriate engagement between the selected sleeve and the shackle member, and particularly the stop portion. Even further, appropriate mechanisms could be provided so that the sleeve is adapted to releasably clip to the stop that is defined on the shank of the locking device. Accordingly, these examples are only representative to illustrate that a variety of techniques could be employed to accomplish the retention of the sleeve over the shank 30, and the ordinarily skilled artisan should appreciate that the present invention should not unnecessarily be confined to the illustrative examples discussed herein.

From the foregoing, it should be appreciated that a variety of different constructions of locking devices and dimension adjustment and conversion mechanisms therefor are within the ambient of the present invention. For example, the diameter and length of linear shank 30 may be varied to suit the particular needs of a locking device. Thus, the locking devices according to the present invention may be used as receiver locks, coupler locks and the like. Indeed, virtually any type of shackle configuration is within the scope of the present invention so long as it has an

axially insertable latch portion which will mate with a locking head in combination with a shackle member having an adjustable diameter to meet the needs of different sized connection unit apertures. Moreover, it will be understood, as previously discussed, that any type of locking head as well as stop member construction, operation and/or configuration may be utilized with the present invention, and the invention shall not be confined or limited in any way by the locking head and stop member embodiments illustrated herein.

It will be appreciated that the device of the present invention enables an individual to utilize a key locking device in any number of situations where the size of the articles being locked along with the size of the locking apertures provided therein are varied, yet the same locking device may be used by simply adjusting the diameter of the shackle thereof using the present invention. Moreover, different sleeve constructions and combinations are possible while still providing the shank diameter variability capabilities of the invention.

According to the present invention, then, a method is therefore provided employing the locking structures described above. This method includes any steps inherent in the structures or specifically described in the use thereof. The method, then, involves varying the diameter of the linear shank of the locking device to adapt the locking device to variably sized apertures in components to be locked.

Broadly, the method includes the first step of providing a sleeve with an inner diameter sized to closely fit over said shank. This sleeve is telescopically engaged onto the shank and retained in position on the shank. Next, the method positions the shank and sleeve within apertures of the components to be locked. Finally, the locking head is engaged with the latch portion. In the disclosed embodiment the

sleeve has an inner diameter sized to closely fit over the shank and a sleeve length sufficient to extend over a majority of the length of the shank.

The method can further comprise the steps of providing a plurality of sleeves each having a common inner diameter for telescopically engaging the shank and a different outer diameter, selecting a sleeve having an outer diameter corresponding to the size of the apertures in the components to be locked, and inserting the selected sleeve onto the shank to vary the diameter thereof according to the size of the apertures in the components to be locked.

In another form, the method can further comprise the steps of providing a plurality of sleeves having variable inner and outer diameters and configured to be selectively nested within each other, selecting one or more nested sleeves having a combined outer diameter corresponding to the size of the apertures in the components to be locked, and inserting the selected combination of sleeves onto the shank to vary the diameter thereof according to the size of the apertures in the components to be locked.

In either event, the sleeve, if desired, may be retained in position on the shank. This can be done by providing an annular groove in the shank proximate the latch portion thereof, and then positioning a retaining member in said groove about the shank after the sleeve has been telescopically positioned onto the shank. Alternatively, this can be done by providing a first set of threads on one end portion of the sleeve and a second set of threads on the stop portion, and then threadably engaging the sleeve with the stop portion after the sleeve has been telescopically positioned onto the shank.

In another form of the invention, the method includes the first step of providing a sleeve with an inner diameter sized to closely fit over said shank in an engaged

position with said sleeve having a sleeve length sufficient to extend over a majority of the length of said shank when in the engaged position. This method the employs the alternative steps of either telescopingly engaging the sleeve onto said shank and thereafter positioning the shank and sleeve together within one sized aperture or positioning the shank without the sleeve being engaged thereon within another sized aperture. Thereafter, the method includes the step of engaging the locking head with the latch portion. This method, if desired, may include the further step of resisting removal of the sleeve from said shank by providing a compressible resilient element operative to engage the sleeve and said shank when the sleeve is in the engaged position.

Accordingly, the present invention has been described with some degree of particularity directed to the exemplary embodiments of the present invention. It should be appreciated, though, that the present invention is defined by the following claims construed in light of the prior art so that modifications or changes may be made to the exemplary embodiment of the present invention without departing from the inventive concepts contained herein.